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Student transitions: academic support for online distance students

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Background

The University of Edinburgh has placed great importance on the development of distance education, with ODL students reporting a higher level of satisfaction than their on-campus counterparts (PTES survey). It can be a common perception that online students have campus envy and/or they have less support available to them.

It is important that the University understands how to support the unique cohort of online distance learners (ODL), many of whom are mature, juggling work/life commitments, and studying part-time. **53%** of our research survey respondents work full-time and **24%** work part-time.

"I did wonder if online distance learning would offer the same level of academic support that on campus learning offers its students."

Survey response to Q8: Before starting the programme did you have any concerns or requirements in relation to academic support?



Research Project

A joint research project with the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies and the Institute for Academic Development aims to explore the current provision of academic support available at different transitional stages of the student journey. In doing so, Programmes, Schools and potentially other HEIs, will be better equipped to:

- provide academic support to ODL students which can enhance their student experience;
- potentially reduce attrition rates;
- provide the appropriate academic support at the stages when it is needed.

The aim is to develop a transitions roadmap for academic support for all online distance students as they move into, through, and out of their studies.

Methodology

The initial (pilot) stage of the research (Oct 2017- Mar 2018) included the distribution of a survey (n=17 responses) and interviews (n=3) with students from the online MSc Equine Science programme. This stage has provided a baseline which will be used to prepare and disseminate future surveys, and undertake interviews with other online students, across the University.

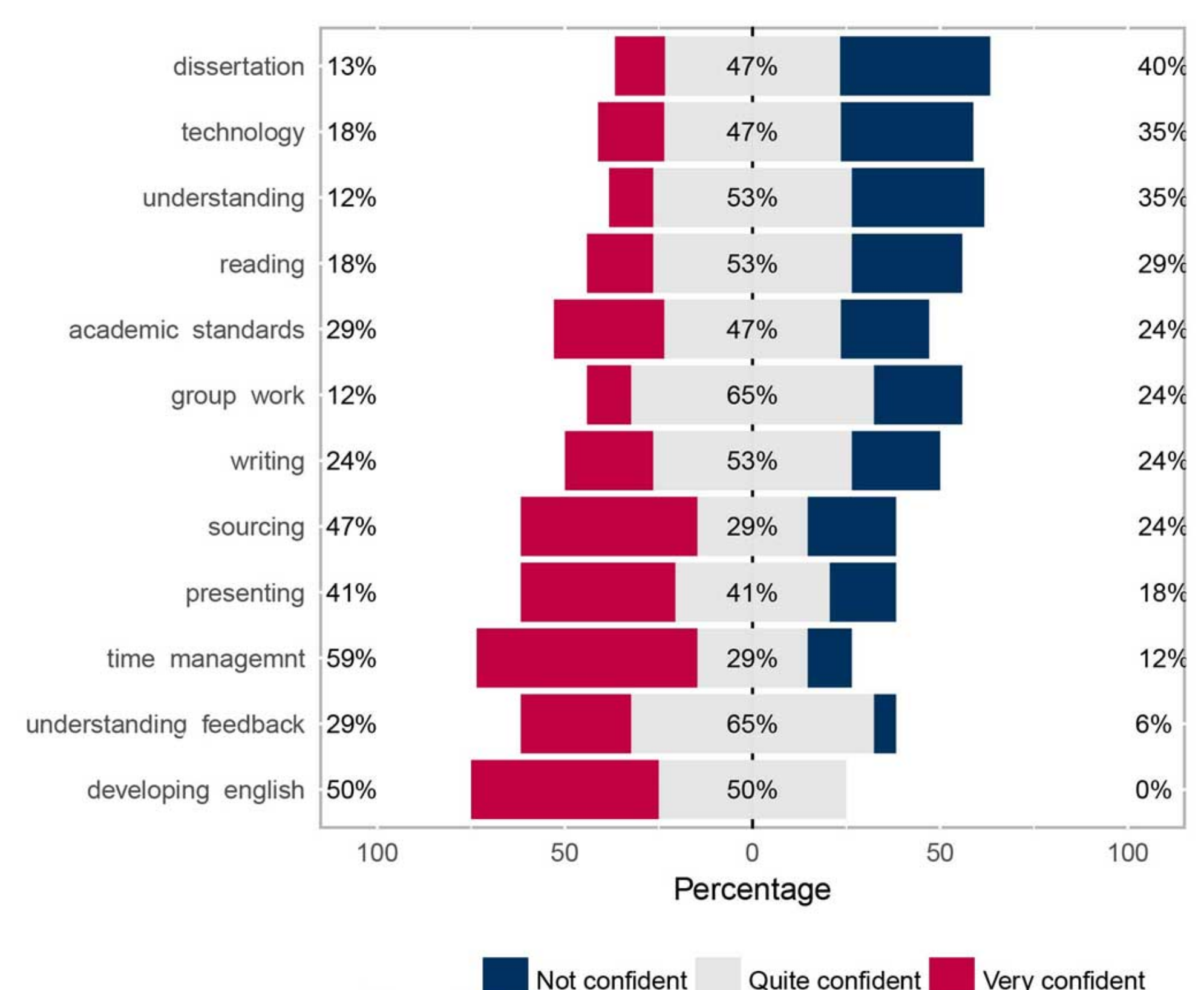
"I did wonder if online distance learning would offer the same level of academic support that on campus learning offers its students."

Survey response to Q8: Before starting the programme did you have any concerns or requirements in relation to academic support?



Results

- **Survey findings** indicate that levels of self-efficacy and awareness of academic support varies in relation to a range of topics (see image 1).
- **Key findings:**
 - **Students are most confident in relation to:** Time management (59%); developing English (50%); and sourcing information (47%)
 - **Students are quite confident in relation to:** Understanding feedback (65%); group work (65%); critical reading (53%)
 - **Students lack confidence in relation to:** Dissertation (40%); technologies (35%), understanding data (35%)



- **Interviews** provided a more in-depth understanding of the student experience and academic support, some of which align with current literature. Interviewees focused on what resources they had found useful e.g. www.ed.ac.uk/iad/postgraduates and the PGT Academic Studies course on Learn. They also highlighted their anxieties or where they lacked confidence e.g. scientific writing and data analysis.

"I feel pretty confident you know, obviously that varies from hour to hour with these things... until I think of the daunting task of the actual data analysis"

Interview participant 2 (2017)

Where next?

Taking on board what the students have stated in this research pilot will enable us to:

- Survey and interview students in other programmes, to ensure there is consensus
- Develop and signpost resources
- Develop an academic skills roadmap, outlining resources and when they are likely to be needed at each stage of the studies.

Contact us

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